

Landmark proposal shifts Palisades facility planning

■ **Recreation:** Preservation staff urges addition to center

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Any plans to tear down the current Palisades Recreation Center and build a brand-new one have been shelved, after an application to designate the Depression-era building as a historic landmark came forward last month.

According to Jackie Stanley of the D.C. Department of General Services, the city's Historic Preservation Office "highly recommended" that the recreation center team leave the existing building at 5200 Sherier Place in place and expand it. The agencies met, along with representation from Ward 3 D.C. Council member Mary Cheh's office, in early June.

"They said based on the fact that an application has been submitted, we can move forward with our design, but our design must include renovating the existing building or adding onto the existing building, but it cannot include demolishing the existing building," Stanley



Brian Kapur/Current file photo

The D.C. budget includes \$9.5 million for improvements.

reported at last week's Palisades advisory neighborhood commission meeting.

The current plans "are not thrown out the window. ... A curveball has been thrown at it," Stanley later added. "It makes us plan in a different direction."

The recreation center, for which the project team has \$9.5 million allocated for modernization, is currently scheduled to be complete in spring 2017. The post-renovation facility is expected to include a gym, a fitness center, a computer lab, multipurpose and leisure space, a fully equipped kitchen and more.

Last month, D.C. resident Kent Boese filed the application on behalf

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of Historic Washington Architecture to designate the building and playground as a landmark. The site carries historic significance, he argues, in part due to the building's comparatively large size when it was built, which allowed for events such as dances, orchestras and civic association meetings to take place at a recreation center for the first time. Boese, a Columbia Heights advisory neighborhood commissioner, has also filed nominations for other historic playgrounds around the city.

"The building is important; it's the only building of its kind that was ever built in the District's playgrounds system. ... This is a larger building than what was typical in the '30s," Boese said.

He added that landmarked buildings often receive additional attention and care from the city.

"I've noticed that when a building is historic ... the city actually gets really good contractors and really good architects. They take the designation seriously and you usually get superior work and a much better solution," Boese said.

Previously, Stanley had said that renovating the building might be a costlier path than tearing it down and building a new one. That issue divided residents, with some focusing on cost savings and others arguing that

the building should be preserved but retrofitted with modern amenities.

The Historic Preservation Review Board has so far provided no timeline for a decision on the landmark application. Boese said community members could request the board expedite the case.

Palisades neighborhood commission chair Tom Smith supports preserving the current building and doesn't buy the claim that a new building would be cheaper. "I have heard no reason why the community should be pushing to tear that facility down," Smith said in an interview.

But a March survey of 449 Palisades residents found that 87 percent prefer not to preserve the current building or prefer preserving only some of its facade. The site improvement team — composed of residents and neighborhood leaders who give input on the project — said in a statement that it believes "a new, creatively designed, state-of-the-art recreation center can and should be constructed as promptly as possible."

Smith, however, doesn't think the survey carries much weight.

"You don't make decisions about historic preservation on the basis of surveys," Smith said. "I don't think the people advocating for it to be torn down have done their homework to be able to show that it is not a building that should be preserved."